

Sermon preached by Mr J K Popham
at Galeed Chapel Brighton
on Wednesday evening 23 November 1921

ISAIAH 59 verses 1 and 2

"Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that
it cannot save; neither His ear heavy, that it cannot
hear: But your iniquities have separated
between you and your God, and your sins have hid His
face from you, that He will not hear"

Do you complain that you cannot get the Lord's ear? Do you complain that sin seems continually to gain the victory? Do you feel that there is a bar between you and your God? Do you realise the barrenness of your souls, and the unfruitfulness of your profession, and are you ready sometimes to complain, to think that the unwillingness is on God's side? that you are quite ready to be blessed if He would bless you? that you are quite broken down and have no strength at all? If such be your complaint, and if such be your feeling toward, and about, the Lord, it may be that He will open your eyes to see exactly the case, to see it in its precise bearing, to see it as here it is set forth. If we do not get the Lord's ear, if we never receive returns to prayer, is there not a cause? And is the cause in the Lord? Can you arraign Him? Can you say your heart is upright, and you can see no reason why He should withhold, as He does withhold? These words which I have read are not spoken to the heathen, to the dead, and the blind, and the ignorant, to people who have never known the Lord, never had any mercy bestowed on them. They are spoken to people who had been brought into a national covenant with God, had had infinite mercies, good laws, and the Sabbaths, and the Spirit. The manna of God and the water He caused to flow to them out of the flinty rock. People who had professed themselves to be His, and had said that they would obey Him. "Their heart", as we read in the Psalms "was not right with God". They were not stedfast in the covenant; they turned back in the day of battle; they were as a deceitful bow. Now do you know the counterpart of these people? Do you know a man, a woman, who answers painfully, guiltily, to these words? The two verses set forth two great things. May the Lord help

me to give a few hints with respect to them.

The first verse sets forth the unchangeableness of God. His hand, what it always was; His ear is as it ever was. There is no change in His heart, no change in His mind. He is just as He ever was. "I am the Lord I change not". This is an infinite mercy for us, little though we know of it, little though we feel of it. If God changed as we do, what would become of us? By His hand we are to understand His power, and by its not being shortened we are to understand that there are no difficulties in Himself, that He is as able to do, to bless, as He ever was. And, inasmuch as the motions of His hand, His working, His operations, come from His heart - His love dictated His ways - it is an infinite mercy that He changes not. It is said that He rests in His love, but He does not always show it. His love is Covenant love and it is wonderful that this chapter, opening so solemnly, closes so remarkably, so blessedly. Here are people who have broken that national covenant that was made with them for their good, and from whom, because of their sins, the unchangeable God hid Himself. Now He says at the close of this chapter, this is My covenant with My Son. I make a new covenant, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers, which covenant they brake though I was a husband to them (Jeremiah 31 v 32). This is the new covenant, as the Apostle Paul says in the Hebrews, quoting from Jeremiah - "I will put My laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to Me a people". And they shall not say every man to his neighbour and his brother, Know the Lord, for all shall know Me from the least of them unto the greatest, for I will forgive their sins and remember their iniquities no more. (Hebrews 8 v 10). And this is the same covenant - "As for Me, this is My covenant with them, saith the LORD; My Spirit that is upon Thee" - Mine only begotten Son incarnate - "and My words which I have put in Thy mouth" - the words which Christ tells us in the gospel that He came to speak - "shall not depart out of Thy mouth" (Isaiah 59 v 21). Did you ever pray with the Psalmist, "O take not the Word of truth utterly out of my mouth". If that prayer is answered it will be because the Word of God is in the mouth of Christ, and shall not depart out of it. Therefore He will speak it again and again. "Nor out of the mouth of thy seed" It will never go from you. "Nor out of the mouth of Thy seed's seed, saith the LORD from henceforth and for ever." And here

you have in the covenant the unchangeableness of God. He is unchangeable in His nature and He is unchangeable in His new covenant. So His hand is not shortened. All you need He can do for you. All the deliverances you require He is able to command for you. All the victories you require and pray for, though you, at present, have no answers to your prayers, He is able to give you. And His ear, ever open to prayer, is not closed, is not heavy or dull, so that your cries cannot penetrate it. "His ear is not heavy that it cannot hear". And this is a great mercy. You find Solomon in his prayer at the dedication of the temple, the house which he built for the Lord, making mention of the various conditions into which Israel might come. If, when they are in captivity they remember Thee and turn to this house which I have built, then hear Thou in heaven. If they remember God and pray to Him, then says Solomon, hear Thou in heaven Thy dwelling-place, and when Thou hearest forgive. If they come into an experience of famine and turn to Thee, then hear Thou in heaven. All through the difficulties, captivities, defeats, sins, ignorance that they should experience, turning to their God in those conditions and opening their mouths in prayer, turning to the house which Solomon had built, and in which the Lord was, in which He had put His Name, and which was therefore a type of the Lord Jesus, and the indwelling of God in Him; if they remember and turn to this, then hear Thou. So clearly we are taught that when there appears to be a death here, turn to prayer. And when there is no entrance, and when there are no returns to prayer, and when captivity is continued, and there are no workings of God, no dealings of mercy, no mighty hand stretching forth, no operations of the Spirit felt, it is not because the hand of the Lord is shortened that it cannot do those things, nor His ear heavy that He cannot hear those cries. And if the Holy Ghost should convince us of this solemn truth it will bring us to much consideration and searching of heart. When did you find God operating on your heart? When did you get some deliverance commanded for you? When did you feel the Lord working mightily in you, as well as for you, stretching out His hand, and with a high hand bringing you forth from some death, some Egypt, some evil, some affliction? Vital religion is not an empty profession. Vital religion has in it this, among other things, some gifts from God, some works of God wrought, some deliverances commanded, some manifestations of the power of Christ. "The kingdom of God is not in word only but also in power,"

and it behoves us, as professing the Name of the Lord, and at the same time making complaints that we do not get near the Lord, that He does not often come to us, that He does not appear to work for us, or to work in us, and also complain that we do not gain access and have not that liberty in prayer which we once had, and perhaps often had, and do not get the sweet and sacred returns to prayer that we formerly received, I say if it be so with us, it will be a great thing, a good thing, if we are enabled to be very critical of ourselves in so solemn an experience. "Let us" - as it is said in the Lamentations - "Let us search and try our ways and turn unto the Lord". There is an influence of sin always in us or about us, an influence of the lust of this world, the pride of life, an influence from temptation, an influence of death, for death is within us as well as about us. And this evil influence, like a contagious disease, seems to stamp death upon our spirits, and bring us into bondage, and captivity, and our enemies have the mastery, and then it may be that, through the pride and ignorance of our hearts, we may think that the Lord just is not willing to bless us, and that, though we cry out and shout, He shuts out our prayer. We think this without any searching into the cause of it. And this is an error of spirit we are all much liable to. There is so much of self in us, so much of sin, so much of pride, so much of self-justification in us, that we are very apt to fall into this snare, and into this wrong judgement. Now as if the Lord should come to correct it, He says, behold, complainer of God, saying that He cannot or will not work as you hoped He had done in the past; behold this great truth, your God who blessed you in the past, with whom you used to walk in simplicity and humility of heart; behold, He is the same, He has not changed, His promises have not failed, cannot fail. His power is not shortened, decayed; He is not helpless. This is an instruction. It has, to all to whom it is spoken, a direction. It turns the complaint round. It brings the sinner to see the error of judgement he has indulged in. Why, he must say, God is the same to endless years, and His promise is the same, the promise I have hoped in; surely He cannot deny that. Then the silence of God to me, and the lack of His work in me, and for me, must be from another source; attributable to another cause. If you have had anything like this teaching it has produced in you a fear, and a jealousy. A fear lest you should continue in your present barren state, lest you should be left to the power of the enemies that have taken you captive, lest you

should lack those operations always which in early days you were favoured to feel. It will bring also a jealousy in your spirit, and moreover a searching. A jealousy? Yes a great jealousy. God's Name is Jealous, and as He may speak to you in this instruction it will bring a jealousy into your own heart about yourself. It will make you afraid of yourself, afraid of your own judgement of your case, and bring you to search and try your ways and turn again in humble confession and supplication to your God. Let me just for a moment emphasise the kind word that the Lord uses. He does not say, "between you and God or the God of heaven", but He says "your God"; "between you and your God". He does not change, He does not repent taking a sinner. He never will repent. "The gifts and calling of God are without repentance". He will not repent. "Is Ephraim My dear son? is he a pleasant child? for since I spake against him I do earnestly remember him still: therefore My bowels are troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him". (Jeremiah 31 v 20). Even though God says, by this prophet - "For the iniquity of his covetousness was I wroth, and smote him: I hid Me and was wroth", and then he was not corrected, "he went on frowardly in the way of his heart", though thus dealt with (Isaiah 57 v 17/18) Then said the Lord, I will use another means. I will walk to this person, this child of Mine in another way. I have smitten him and he has gone on frowardly. Now I will kiss him and overcome him. I will "restore comforts unto him and to his mourners". So these things do show us what I have said, that God is unchangeable; not only in Himself, but in His mercies, and in His covenant. If that is so - and blessed be God it is so - as we know from Scripture, and have had some proof of in our own experience - if that is so, how is it that we, some of us, are in our poor, lean, captive, barren state? Have you put the question honestly to yourselves at any time? If I am a child of God why am I thus? Captivated, ruled over by the enemy of my soul, under the confusion of my mind, and the power of some sin. How is it that it is thus with me? Why does not the Lord hear me? Why does He not stretch forth His power and snatch me from my snares and my sins, and my ways which I confess to Him? Why does He leave me as a prey to my enemies? If you have asked yourselves this question, or these questions, honestly as in the sight of God, you may have had an answer, or you will get one, which is a great instruction. That we have in the next verse. The first shows us of the Lord, that He has not changed at all, that He will not, He cannot change. But

there is a reason for His withholding, for His not working in us and for us, and for His not receiving our petitions as we found Him doing in the past. And the reason is found out, not by ourselves - we should never know it - but He finds it out and tells us of it. A faithful friend will wound. A faithful God wounds His people. He wounds them by conviction, and this is the wound He here gives. "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear." May the Lord help us to fall flat before Him under the influence, the power of this word.

"Separated". You were once near Him. Yes, I was near Him you may say. I was near the cross. The Redeemer came to me and I embraced Him. I felt His presence, I tasted that He was gracious. I looked to Him and saw Him all glorious. I embraced Him in His Person and in the benefits of His atoning work. I received Him as the Lord my righteousness. He was in me a well of life. His fullness was my supply. I ran to Him as a frightened child when sin, some sin assailed me, or some temptation affrighted me, or some affliction came upon me. I ran to Him as a frightened child and He came in His mercy and embraced me, and told me not to fear; that He would be with me; that every good work that I must do would my gracious Saviour for me work and in me too of His special favour. I saw His Person by faith, I saw Him crucified, I saw Him dead and buried, I saw Him rise again from the tomb, and I found His word in my heart, telling me not to fear; that He was dead, and now was alive for evermore, Amen. That He had the keys of hell and of death. You, says the Lord, you whom I drew with the cords of love and the bands of a man, to whom I appeared, to whom I spoke, from off whose jaws I took the yoke and to whom I laid meat and said - "Eat O friends and drink, yea drink abundantly O beloved"; you whom I took up into covenant, and with whom I made a covenant in My Son, and in whose mouth are My very words. O my brethren, it is a great experience to have had, to have been near the Lord; a very great experience to have heard His word in your hearts, to have seen His blessed Person, to have embraced Him in the arms of your faith, the antidote of death. A very great experience to have felt nothing between you and God in the way of controversy, or sin, or guilt, or death. A very, very, very great experience. It cannot be exaggerated, it is so wonderful, that God, who passed by fallen

angels, and passed by millions of our fellow creatures, leaving them in their fallen, and dead, and guilty state, doing nothing for them in a way of grace, should have come to us, laid hold of us. Think of it, O think of it. He said in Ezekiel to His people, you were dead, you were loathsome, but I came to you. You were dead and it was a time of love, and I came to you, and I spread My skirt over you. I was not deterred from coming by your condition. I came in love, for love's sake, and I spread My skirt of righteousness over you, and I said unto you 'Live', and you lived and you became Mine. And I gave you gold, and silver, and fine linen, and flax, and oil, and wine, and I made your beauty perfect through My comeliness which I had put upon you. (Ezekiel 16) You know what this is in spirit, do not some of you? and God was yours, and you became His. You to whom all this goodness has been manifested, in whom the Lord has spoken these mercies, and done these infinitely kind things; you to whom heaven has been sure; you to whom the sight of Jesus Christ has been granted, so that this is true of you as it was of the disciples when Christ said to them - "Blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears for they hear". For I say unto you many have sought to hear these things and have neither seen nor heard them (Matthew 13 v 16/17). Can you forget the day when Christ came to you, when He was revealed in you, when He was life in you, and righteousness to you, and power, and comfort, and goodness. When your guilt was removed, and your death swallowed up, and your bondage taken away, and food laid to you. O, it is a great thing that Christ sees you. And now what do you say? I am not near Him. He is not near to me. There is a distance, a shyness on my part, a shyness. I am afraid of Him. I feel sometimes as if I have not courage to lift my face up to Him. I feel, you will say, like Ezra who said to the Lord, "We are before Thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before Thee because of this". (Ezra 9 v 15), and "I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to Thee." (verse 6). You feel like that. Now said the Lord, there is distance between us, there is a separation, there is not that communion that there used to be, not that familiarity that once existed, not that sweetness that you felt in My presence. You are not near Me, I am distant from you. You know this, do not you? dear friends who have had the presence of Christ, the presence of the Father, the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And now the Lord points out what it is that has separated between

the Divine Majesty and our souls. "Your iniquities have separated between you and your God". He will never be other than your God, but He will visit for these iniquities. He will never disown His own, but because they are His, because He loves them, He chastens them, and hides His face. And I am disposed to say this - and have no fear that any child of God will contradict me - that the heaviest chastisement that the Lord can inflict on a child of His is not some temporal trouble, but the hiding of His face. The separation that comes to pass as between a living Saviour and a once tender-hearted, reverent, worshipping, affectionate child, this separation is a sort of death, and O, it is a death when you perceive what has brought it to you, and perhaps you find some particular sin pointed out to you by the Lord. There may come a day when you can say, now I know when this departure began, when this separation was set up. I know that I indulged something in my heart, that I nursed some sin, that I liked that consideration of some evil, that I hesitated in respect of some temptation, and hesitation on my part gave strength and vigour to the temptation, and I fell a prey to it. We may sleep in some sin for a time, as David slept in his sin, but when a Nathan comes and says, "Thou art the man", then we awake and then we see, and then we feel. The beginning of sin is like the letting out of water. Who can bound the issues thereof? The word is "the beginning of strife", and I would say - by accommodation I may say - the beginning of any sin is the beginning of a separation between you and God. Then you will perceive prayer is quite different from what it was. You will perceive your heart grow hard and you may come across that word, or the Spirit may, without your ever reading it bring it to your heart - "Take heed, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" This separation is, to a sinner who has had God's presence and becomes convinced of the separation, like a wilderness, a waste howling wilderness. It exposes the soul to many fears and dangers, to many devils, as it were, howling and roaring, and going about seeking to devour him. This separation means barrenness, confusion. Unbelief thrives, hardness grows. Distance is grievous, but sin may make distance not very terrible, and this is one thing that I have feared for myself, for sin to make separation not very terrible. If you are separated from God, you are separated, as to your experience, from the influence of a pure, holy life, and it is a solemn thing to be so separated. Your sins have separated between you and your God.

Your iniquities have done this, "and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear." Not that He has got no ear; no, not that, but that He will not open it. When you cry and shout for a time it is as if He takes no notice of you. You lay a case before Him; it seems to have no attention from Him. He tries you with His eyelids, and you see now no eye of pity; no eye of love looks on you. And that means darkness and brings trouble. Your sins, do you know them? In this chapter they said they knew them. As for our transgressions, they are with us, and as for our iniquities, we know them. (v 12). What a mercy not to be ignorant of your sins, the sins that have brought chastisement and trouble to you.

Now ere I close, let me say this, that this unchangeable God, of whom I have tried to speak a little, but very little, thus dealing with His sinful children, does so in infinite mercy, and I was greatly struck to find that at the close of a chapter opening so solemnly, with such chastising words, such a solemn rod of correction, such a heavy rebuke for sin, should close with such a beautiful light, such a wondrous word. That that God, who tells us that He resents our sins, that He chastens us for them, that He hides His face on account of them, that He withholds the working of His mighty power from us because we have sinned against Him, that that gracious, unchanging, unchangeable God in the Covenant says that His words, and His Spirit shall never depart from us. Is there any evidence that this is so in our cases? Let me say in conclusion, this word. If conviction is lodged in us, if new cries are awakened in us, if fresh applications to the throne of God's heavenly grace, if longings for the atonement to be once more applied, the blood of Jesus to cleanse us from our sins, may we not conclude therefrom that this Covenant God has reproved us and shown to us our true position and condition in order that He may restore us? Turn at your leisure to the closing chapter in Hosea, and there you will find the same God, speaking in the glorious gospel of Christ, saying to His children: "O Israel thou hast fallen by thine iniquity". O Israel, turn to the Lord, your only remedy, your only hope, your only refuge, your only cure, and restoration; turn to the Lord. And says Israel, how shall I, how can I? I am ashamed, I blush to lift up my face to this God. O, the Lord comes with a remedy to this poor, ashamed thing and says: "Take with you words, and turn to the LORD: say unto Him, Take

away all iniquity". He against whom you have committed the iniquity says come to Me and say this to Me - "Take away all iniquity and receive us graciously; so will we render the calves of our lips". And the effect is: "Asshur shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses" - we have done it, we have relied on horses, we have looked to them and to ourselves but "we will not ride upon horses - neither will we say any more" - we are so weary of it now, we will never again say to any idol - "ye are our gods: for in Thee the fatherless findeth mercy". Now what does this Lord say to one whom He teaches to make this confession and this prayer? He says: "I am like a green fir tree". Thou art barren, thou art poor, thou never canst bring forth any fruit to My praise and glory. Thou art a poor, dead, barren creature. "From Me" - thy Redeemer - "is thy fruit found". O what a glorious gospel, what a glorious gospel it is. Think of it, a sinner so dull, so stained with sin, made even as pure as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is, by His blood and Spirit; by His precious grace, by His all-sufficient working, working jealousy, and confession, and desire to be made right, to come near the Lord again by the Lord's return to him. That such a sinner shall find, though his sins were as scarlet they shall be as wool; though they were red like crimson they shall be white as snow. Well, may the Lord lodge convictions in us, and breathe prayer in us, and give us to understand what He says, I will love him freely, I will heal his backslidings; he is My son and I will never give him up.

AMEN.